

Thoughts on Collaboration: Art and Technology
Techne - the integrated practice of art and science
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Can the conceptual frameworks of the once-new media of "video" and that of the now aging "new media" collaborate?

Dichotomies

Individualism was a hallmark of mid-20th century fine arts practice, and an essential aspect of any definition of the identity of the American citizen. But contemporary artists of the 1960s began to contract out for services and use commercially available materials – Oldenberg, Judd, Serra, and Christo. Is purchasing services, which the artist is unable or unwilling to provide collaboration? Is personal mark-making necessary?

Collaboration flourished in music and performative arts, and was adopted by media artists in the late 1960s and early 70s, as they struggled to create new working models for the then-new medium of video. Artists created collaborative working relationships to achieve projects which pushed the boundaries of conceptual and activist art works. Art Farm, TTV, Raindance, Video Freek.

Formal and informal collaborations were also created among artists and technologists, as individuals worked together to create new instruments with which to make works. Commercially available tools were too expensive, too restrictive, and unimaginative. Vesulkas, Sandin, Experimental TV Center.

Art was something that a group of people could engage in simultaneously, not as parallel practice, but as interactive human activity. Collaboration was a successful economic strategy: some video instruments were beyond the reach of individual ownership. To keep pace with the rapid advances in technology, group ownership was an important strategy. "Production units" – coops, collectives, and media arts groups – reflected the social and political Zeitgeist of the times.

Collaborations in the media world of the 1960s and 1970s occurred among artists, among artist and technologist, and among media and other arts disciplines. The artwork was experimental, the process was experimental, the discourse and practice were experimental.

In order to achieve this collaborative practice, artists moved outside the existing organizational structures – art world, or corporate media – and created a more utopian system. The art world and the economic engine it serviced were critiqued. The distinction between artist and amateur was rejected; citizens became arts activists. Art works became immaterial.

Eventually this experimental and collaborative art was co-opted and appropriated into the dominant cultural practice, and experimental and unconventional works became the norm. Artists willingly elected to participate in the very worlds they critiqued. Media artists sought broadcast outlets for programming and became art museum stars.

What is the evolutionary matrix for new media?

The late 1960s media universe of abstract/experimental/art video

- immaterial – the phenomenology of video
- processual – lacking of "objecthood"
- conceptual, ideational or systemic – not a commodity
- formally inventive – a medium creating itself
- Immediate
- interactive – feedback system
- time-based
- sculptural – aspects of apparatus
- anti-authoritarian, radical/democratic critique of capitalist economic system
- collective or cooperative ownership as social organizing principle
- open-sourced sharing of work, information, tool sets

These concepts were realized in video through the media collectives formed to produce work; through shared information and videotape exchanges by bartering and gifting; through media organizations created to provide free access to media tools to all people, to circumvent the means of production tightly controlled by major corporations; through the creation of works critical of existing social, educational, political and arts institutions.

Contact

Collaboration and sharing of information were a part of the early philosophical and therefore physical structures of the field. We gave away videotapes, rather than selling or distributing them; we shared schematics and modifications to tools so that all could benefit. Most people were involved for love, not money; we were amateurs, in the real sense of that word.

The gift economy ensured that video groups

could survive, without emphasis on earned income. We didn't have to compete with each other to survive. The field was small; we knew each other. The New York State Council on the Arts established for itself a leadership role in ensuring that organizations and individuals convened on a regular basis.

There were town meetings, small conferences, and informal symposia. We created our own circles of communication – largely by phone or personal travel. There were organized tours, bicycling of tapes and artists around the state, to provide public exposure for the art and makers.

Those of us working in the area of "experimental" video or "video art" had, of necessity, to engage in tool design and development. Early commercially available tools were very limited and limiting. The collaboration between artist and engineer had precedents and origins in the art of the early 20th century. Because we had nothing to gain by being secretive or proprietary about our inventions, the information could be passed around. We felt it was morally the correct thing to do. Some of these inventions were partially supported by public funds on a State or national level, so there was also a requirement to make the information public, if at all possible.

The issue of genres was and remains complex. At first I don't think any of us saw any genres or definitive boundaries. As the "camps" emerged, boundaries were reinforced by funding agencies, art institutions and scholars, critics all struggling to make "sense" of the form. Interdisciplinary or collaborative work didn't easily fit into genre or category.

The web now seems like a natural place to re-share this information and to engage in 21st century collaborations. This is why the Experimental TV Center began the Video History Project in 1994.

From the contributions we receive, we wonder about the parallels between the development of early video and the emergence of new media art and practices.

- Does a decentralized network, open source-based, support a collaborative process or circumvent one?
- Does collaboration engender responsibility to the network? Beyond the network?
- Discourse across disciplines?
- Is collaboration a distinct practice? Or is that oxymoronic?
- Are two heads really better than one?
- Is interdisciplinary collaboration an overarching discipline?
- Is art-as-commodity dominant, and destructive of collaboration?
- Does collaboration support distributed knowledge?



Sherry Miller Hocking and Ralph Hocking

Sherry Miller Hocking has worked since 1972 with the Experimental Television Center, which provides support and services to the media arts community. "We offer an international residency program, educational opportunities and sponsorship assistance for independent media and film artists. Since 1989 Hocking has directed the Electronic Arts Grants Program, providing funding opportunities to individuals and media arts organizations. In 1993 she designed the Video History Project, which a multi-faceted effort to reclaim the multiple histories of the independent media field. "We partner with others to offer conferences and symposia, and to develop informational resources". Hocking serves as director of the Video History Web, a dynamic and interactive on-going research collection and dissemination site for media professionals, educators, and media programmers as well as the general public. www.experimentaltvcenter.org

The dominant paradigms of TV and the art world

TV was video's "Frightful Parent":

- hierarchically organized and professionally produced
- reinforced the status quo
- work funded by capital from advertising
- one-way audience delivery system
- "objective" information from authoritative source; talking head
- images were formulaic & representational
- formal narrative conventions derived from theater and radio
- goal was to reach mass audiences

Video/art was the antithesis of TV

- organizing principles were individual and collective
- institutions were artist-run and democratic
- work was created by amateurs and artists
- funded by gift-economy
- two-way, participatory information structures
- subjects were subjective and personal
- presentation was creative, often abstract, non-narrative
- aesthetics central to medium
- goal was to reach specialized, smaller audiences

Art World

- industrial and corporate models
- elitist - access restricted
- artist as star
- restricted acceptable media
- concern with reproducibility of work - easily reproduced media devalued the art product
- precious and unique object - as means of maintaining value, limiting supply

Video held conflicted relationship with art

- anti high-art
- group and collective process; inclusive
- equality of participant-producers
- tapes shared, copied freely
- no precious art objects - erasable
- infinitely reproducible, impermanent